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ABSTRACT

This paper explores a range of attitudes about bilingual/bicultural learners in a secondary school context. It presents findings of a qualitative case study of the role of the classroom context in constraining or enabling English Language Learners' (ELLs') academic success. Interviews were conducted with mainstream teachers in English, Social Studies, Math, and Science, as well as the school ESL teachers. A series of classroom observations were also conducted with each teacher-participant, and artifacts (such as worksheets, text assignments) were analyzed for the linguistic-cognitive demands placed on the learner. The paper discusses the problematic contradictions embedded in beliefs teachers and staff hold about both adolescent learners in general and adolescent ELLs. Appendixes contain a chart expressing the continuum of teacher stances and features of high schools that promote the achievement of language-minority students. (RS)

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Who's Afraid of Bilingual Learners? The Role of Teachers' Attitudes and Beliefs

by

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paper presented as part of the panel session:

Critical Impositions: Identifying Factors that Impede the Academic Success of English Language Learners

The Spring Conference of the National Council of Teachers of English
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CS 217 066

"Who's afraid of bilingual learners?": The role of teachers' attitudes and beliefs

by Carolyn Layzer

presented at the Spring Conference of NCTE, New York, March 18, 2000

This paper explores a range of attitudes about bilingual/bicultural learners in a secondary school context. Below, I will present findings of a qualitative case study of the role of the classroom context in constraining or enabling English Language Learners' (ELLs') academic success. In this case study, interviews were conducted with mainstream teachers in English, Social Studies, Math, and Science, as well as the school ESL teachers. A series of classroom observations were also conducted with each teacher-participant, and artifacts (such as worksheets, text assignments) were analyzed for the linguistic-cognitive demands placed on the learner. The paper discusses the problematic contradictions embedded in beliefs teachers and staff hold about both adolescent learners in general and adolescent ELLs.

Tacit theories

We all have tacit theories about a variety of things. Teachers hold tacit theories about culture and about language. Because they are tacit, they are seldom exposed to scrutiny and public discussion. An example of this kind of theory is found in the following statement:

> In [culture X], the teacher is revered, so [students from culture X] don't feel comfortable questioning me. I want to value their culture, so I don't expect them to ask questions or speak out in class.

This statement contains several assumptions (tacit theories) about culture:

i) Culture is uniform and unchanging across socioeconomic groups and regions, and over time.

ii) Classroom culture is the same as national culture.

With assumptions (statements (i) and (ii)) made explicit, it is easy to see that they are problematic. If we think about what we know of our own country, it's easy to see that culture is varied and

dynamic across socioeconomic groups, regions, and over time. Compare, for example, the cultures of wealthy New Yorkers with homeless New Yorkers, or New Yorkers and residents of Dallas, or New Yorkers of the 1750s and the New Yorkers of the 1950s. As for classrooms, one classroom can be very different from the next, and few classroom cultures actually resemble anyone's home culture. Rules of one classroom might include raising your hand before you speak, students sitting in rows and teacher standing in the front of the room, and students not challenging the teacher's opinion. Another classroom might be organized to include students working in groups, exchanging opinions, and freely questioning the teacher.

The point is, each teacher constructs a classroom culture that may be very different from or very similar to that of the classrooms around her. Students learn to adapt to the new cultures of classrooms as they change teachers year after year. Of course there are some broad similarities in curriculum and in classroom culture within a country, but it is difficult enough to generalize accurately, that it is not worth doing so. A more efficient strategy is to try to help students find ways to be successful in the U.S. educational system, and we should define that success very carefully to include the aims and aspirations of the student, without relying on stereotypes and assumptions about culture, heritage, or life chances.

We often reveal our tacit theories in the things we say. Below are some statements made by teachers in our case study. Following each are some points highlighting issues raised by the statement. The first set of statements are not related directly to culture, but rather to teachers' misunderstandings of the process of schooling. Very broadly, these fall into three categories: Placement, success, and classroom interaction.

Placement

Ms. Federoff, a mainstream English teacher told us:

English 12 is basically your lowest level kids, kids who have a history of failure... obviously most of them are not planning on going to college...there's nowhere else

> to put them really and they have to have English, so that's why they are in there. [interview, 5/7/99]

Ms. Federoff assumes that the children in her class are not planning to go to college, and that they were placed there according to a practice that is sound and rational. She has very low expectations for their learning; basically, she believes that the children are only in her class because they have to be there and that they would not be there if they had the choice. In fact, five of the ELL students in her classes *were* planning to go to college, and *three* of them had already been accepted to college at the time of the study. These students were placed in this lower-track class because their ESL teacher believed:

> Upon suggestion of the admissions officer at [local university], where most of our kids go to school, they [admissions personnel] feel it is better to have a higher grade on the transcript than it is to have a 'college bound' course with a lower grade, hence the lower placement. It is always with the student's approval that this is done. [written response from Susan, ESL teacher, 8/5/99]

Susan's practice is clearly well-meaning, but it undermines the ELLs' access to educational opportunities. In fact, in the English 12 class we observed, those students weren't getting especially good grades, and they weren't learning the literacy subject matter they needed to learn in order to be successful in college literacy. While students may have given their "approval", it is not clear that ELL students or their parents really understand what is entailed in U.S. college level reading nor what is (or is not) being taught in the lower-track high school classes. Also, Susan is clearly communicating to the ELLs that she doesn't think they would be capable of coping in an academic track class. Rather than having the ELLs struggle with an academic track class (and she assumes, fail), she saves them the pain of failure by steering them to the lower track class.

In summary, both Ms. Federoff's and Susan's approach fit what Hatch (1992, p. 67) refers to as the "benevolent conspiracy": by attempting to provide a comfortable environment without checking or facilitating development of academic content knowledge, teachers effectively

block access to academic content knowledge acquisition. We need to have high expectations for all of our students. Rather than adjusting expectations downward, we actually need to demand more of ELLs, who have to learn roughly 50% more than their cohort classmates just in order to be at grade level (Collier & Thomas, 1999). Of course, that means we must support them in this accelerated learning by ensuring that they are given meaningful access and assistance to academic subject matter in accordance with their educational aims.

Success

Researcher: "What does a student need to be successful in your class?"

Ms. Urbaniak: "Do their homework and ask questions when they don't understand. Kids who just hang in there and do their work, pass" [interview, 5/20/99].

The sentiment "just try" was repeated by three other teachers in our study. Thus the first criterion for success for ELLs in their mainstream classes is whether they expended effort to accomplish the tasks set for them.

There are two things that are insidious about this. The first is obvious: completion of tasks is not equivalent to learning. To the extent that teachers make it clear to students that they can pass if they "just hang in there and do their work," teachers convey their low expectations of students. Jean Anyon (1980) and Jeannie Oakes (1985) have made it clear that this kind of low expectations is typical in lower-track classes and is one of the ways in which schools act to reproduce social inequalities. Here we see that it is not only poor children or children of color who are subjected to this kind of discrimination, children whose first language is not English can also be the subject of low expectations and systematic disservice in schools.

The second insidious aspect is the obverse of the original statement: Kids who don't "do their work," aren't trying, and are therefore unmotivated. Failure is attributed to a failure of the individual student's motivation, rather than any of a multitude of possible causes. One of those causes *could* be linguistic in origin, or it *could* be cultural or even personal, but the teacher has to discover that for herself, instance by instance, just as she would with any other student.

In summary, teachers should not be afraid to discover students' educational aims, and we don't need to second guess them. Finally, it is our responsibility as teachers to organize classroom participation structures that foster learning--affective and academic cognitive development--for all of our learners. This generally means adopting an eclectic approach, but more importantly, it means to shift the emphasis from teaching to learning.

Classroom Interaction

"ESL students are usually loners", "They often remain isolated", "There is little interaction unless they [the students] instigate it." These are fairly typical statements from the 33 surveys we collected in the school. They indicate both an inclination to characterize ELLs' personalities by their marginalization and an inclination of the teachers to adopt a laissez-faire stance towards shaping the classroom culture and climate. Ms. Giles exemplifies this stance:

> I have a feeling that he [Edouard, a refugee immigrant from Rwanda] is a little bit left out. He has moved his seat to the back row and I don't force assigned seats because [very softly] I don't care [laughs]...I just haven't tried to manage the situation basically. They do it. I trust them, so go ahead. [Ms. Giles, interview, 5/6/99]

It is possible for teachers to take charge of the class, take a proactive stance. One such teacher in our study, Ms. Kinski, had involved all of the students in the class in creating a supportive atmosphere in which it was clear that everyone shared responsibility for making sure that all of their classmates understood the material before them. Ms. Kinski had used seating assignments, seatwork pairing, and explicit instruction of native-English-speaking students to achieve this climate.

ELLs are "shy", "timid", "not talkative", "tentative in interacting." These characterizations of ELLs, taken from the teachers' comments in the surveys, reveal that teachers are attributing ELLs "tentativeness" in interacting as personality traits. Rather than trying to label ELLs as particular types of people, teachers should design participation structures that will foster

interaction. This means using some of the strategies that good teachers use to foster interaction with genuinely shy students, such as a variety of pairwork, small group work, independent work, and opportunities to share work publicly on their own terms. In our study, we found that many of the very same ELLs that mainstream teachers identified as being shy or tentative were gregarious, active, and outspoken in their sheltered social studies class.

In summary, when a learner is quiet, it is easy to label him or her as shy or timid; when that learner is an ELL, it is easy to attribute his/her quietness to low proficiency in English. However, often several factors contribute to a student's not speaking in class: A student may perceive the classroom climate as hostile (for example, if other students laugh or make fun of him/her when s/he attempts to speak in class); or s/he may not understand enough of what is going on to ask a question; or s/he may have decided s/he doesn't feel comfortable in the role of seemingly disrespectful young person. Sometimes students have nothing to say, or the "wait time" is too short (other students chime in before s/he can get the answer out). After a few tries, many students decide just to try not to be noticed. In the traditional classroom (typically following the I-R-E participation pattern), it is generally a minority of the students in the class (often as few as five out of thirty) who actually participate orally in class. In this situation, the ELL doesn't stand out at all, making it even more difficult for the teacher to monitor the ELL's learning.

Teacher's stance

With all three of the above areas, it is clear that much will depend on the degree to which the teacher becomes involved in including ELLs, in providing them access to academic success. In our study, we noticed a continuum of teacher stances, ranging from a laissez-faire stance to a proactive one. It is important to note that *all* of the teachers who participated in our study were good, well-meaning, caring teachers. They all believed that they were doing the best for their students. This is due, in part, to the benevolent conspiracy--making a comfortable space *at the expense of* a space in which academic cognitive development is supported. The more proactive teachers had developed strategies--consistent with their own philosophies about teaching and

learning--aimed at making learning more accessible for all students. The more laissez-faire teachers tended to emphasize content delivery (through a more traditional transmission model) and hope for the best. The table in Appendix A gives some examples of statements and actions along the continuum. Clearly, we cannot afford to just hope for the best.

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Appendix A

Continuum of Teacher Stances

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Laissez-Faire Stance	Proactive Stance
• interaction is left up to individual students "There is little interaction unless they instigate [sic] it." [survey response] "I haven't tried to manage the situation, basically. They do it. I trust them..." [Ms. Giles]	**• pairing of students; strategic seat assignment; varied participation structures** Mrs. Daniels pairs ELLs from like language/culture backgrounds. Ms. Kinski used strategic seating: NS-ELL-ELL-NS, and she *explicitly* discussed (w/ss) expectations of collaboration and support. She provided opportunities for students to be recognized by volunteering to show work at the board *or* showing the teacher at your seat.
• students must induce rules, expectations "They need to know how to take notes...but I don't know how to teach them that." [Ms. Giles] "They need to know to ask for help; they need to stop me and say they don't understand; they need to know they don't know how to take notes and ask for help." [Mr. Smith]	**• being explicit about criteria for tasks and assignments** Both Mrs. Daniels and Ms. Urbaniak distributed point-by-point explanations of criteria for assessment. Mrs. Daniels prominently displayed course overview and connections between topics, subtopics, and the "big picture." Layzer & Sharkey (1996) portfolio assessment
• forgetting (?) that language development is an issue for *all* students A Russian ELL asks what 'convection' means, and the teacher concludes that "they don't have the concept of 'convection' in Russian." *vs.* A native-English-speaking student asks the teacher what 'fidelity' means. She gives him the definition but doesn't conclude that "they don't have the concept of 'fidelity' in central Pennsylvania." Several teachers deliver content via lecture. Students have textbooks for courses, but the assignments and tests are based on the lectures rather than the textbook. If a student cannot comprehend the lecture, s/he may not be able to take comprehensible notes on it, and will have no recourse outside of class--even with the help of a tutor or parent/guardian.	**• recognizing language issues in the subject matter** Ms. Kinski (math) conducts whole class strategy instruction for story problems and allows ELLs to continue to use the guide sheets she made. She expressed concerns about the reduced language in lower track texts. Mr. Szymanski (science) is aware of the specialized vocabulary of science and scientific methods. Mrs. Daniels (health) recognizes that all students need to learn situationally appropriate language usage. She believes that students who are able to use language to examine their lives analytically and to communicate will be able to live healthier lives.

Appendix 2

Features of High Schools that Promote the Achievement of Language-Minority Students

1. Value is placed on the students' languages and cultures.
2. High expectations of language-minority students are made concrete.
3. School leaders make the education of language-minority students a priority.
4. Staff development is explicitly designed to help teachers and other staff serve language-minority students more effectively.
5. A variety of courses and programs for language-minority students is offered.
6. A counseling program gives special attention to language-minority students (through counselors who...).
7. Parents of language-minority students are encouraged to become involved in their children's education.
8. School staff members share a strong commitment to empower language-minority students through education.

[From Lucas et al., Table 1 (1990, pp. 324-325); original table includes specific examples as recommendations under each feature]